"Fasting is an act of deep personal worship to God in which Muslims seek to raise their level of God-consciousness. The act of fasting redirects the heart away from worldly activities and towards the remembrance of God. The self-restraint of Ramadan make the heart and mind accustomed to the remembrance and praise of God and to the obedience of His commandments. Muslims focus during this month on strengthening their relationship with the Creator."

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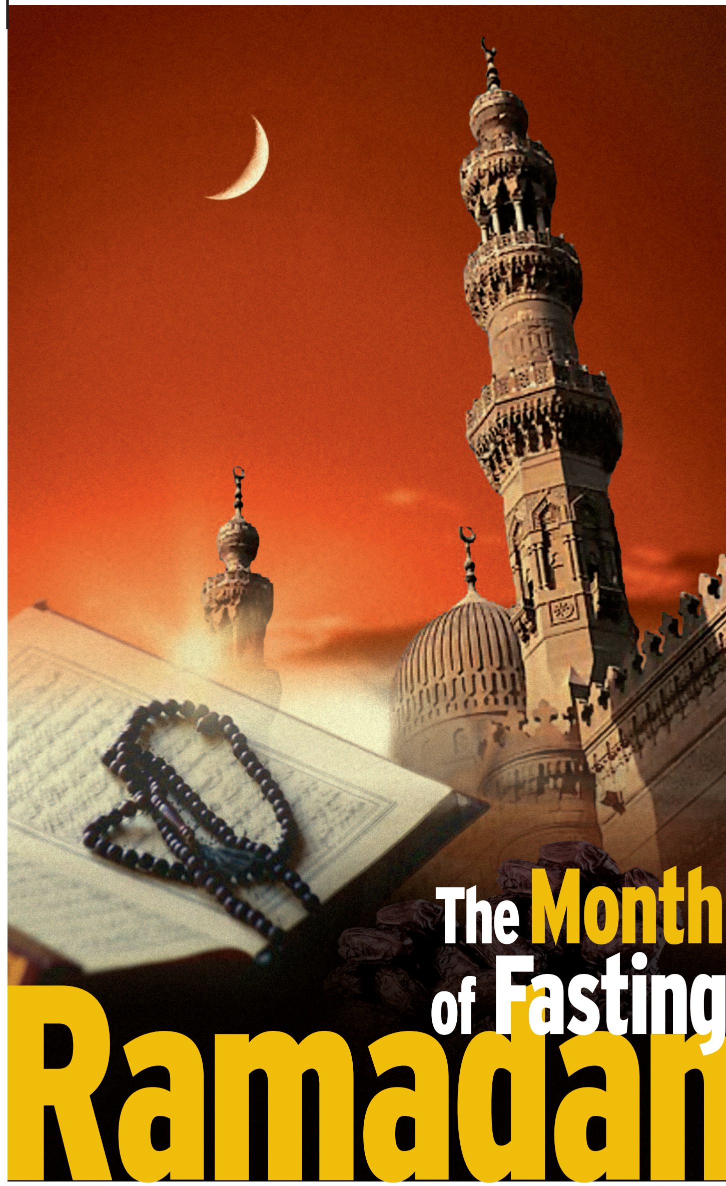
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The Month of Fasting Ramadan

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In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful

"Ramadan is a time for spiritual reflection, prayer and doing of good deeds. Fasting is intended to inculcate self-discipline, self-restraint and generosity."

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It begins with the sighting of the new moon after which all physically mature and healthy Muslims are obliged to fast for the complete month. Fasting is done as an act of worship and obedience to Allah (God). Between dawn and sunset, Muslims abstain from all food, drink and any kind of sexual contact. In addition to this physical component, the spiritual aspects of the fast include an added emphasis on refraining from gossip, lies, obscenity and in general, any sinful act.

God says in the Holy Qur'an: *"O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint... Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting..."(Al-Qur'an 2:183,185).*

Islam is a continuation of the religion of Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be upon them). Hence, it is not surprising to find references to fasting in Judaism and Christianity. Other faiths also enjoin fasting, as they recognize its spiritual benefits. Fasting is thus universally known as a means of gaining self-discipline and of gaining closeness to God. It is the third of the Five Pillars of Islam. The others are declaration of faith (Shahadah), prayer (Salah), charitable-giving (Zakah), and the pilgrimage to Makkah (Hajj). Fasting, together with the other pillars, forms the foundation of the faith. It instills in the individual a feeling of closeness to God and a desire to do good deeds at all times.

Purity of both thought and action are emphasized whilst fasting. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)[1] is reported to have said: "He who does not desist from obscene language and acting obscenely (during the period of fasting), Allah has no need that he does not eat or drink.". The Prophet (pbuh) also said: "Fasting is not only from food and drink, fasting is to refrain from obscene (acts). If someone verbally abuses you or acts ignorantly toward you, say (to them) 'I am fasting; I am fasting.'"

It is common to have one meal (known as Suhoor), just before sunrise and another (known as Iftar), directly after sunset. The breaking of the fast (Iftar) usually consists of dates, following the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). Ramadan strengthens the community: Muslims invite one another for the Iftar meals, and thereby create concern and friendship among neighbors, families and friends. Many people also take Iftar to the mosque and share it with the wider community, especially the poor and needy.

Fasting in the month of Ramadan

All Muslims, from the age of puberty who are physically and mentally well should observe fasting during the month of Ramadan. Islam is a practical way of life and does not place hardship on those for whom the fast would be too difficult. The sick and those traveling may defer their fast until their illness or journey is over. Pregnant women and nursing mothers may also postpone the fast. The very old, who are too weak to fast, and those who have a permanent illness that prevents them from fasting, are excused from fasting. They may feed a needy person for every day missed, if they can afford to do so. The mentally ill are also exempt from fasting.

BENEFITS OF FASTING

Fasting is an act of deep personal worship to God in which Muslims seek to raise their level of God-consciousness. The act of fasting redirects the heart away from worldly activities and towards the remembrance of God. Muslims focus during this month on strengthening their relationship with the Creator. It is a time for spiritual reflection, prayer and doing of good deeds. Fasting is intended to inculcate self-discipline, self-restraint and generosity.

The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) said, *“Indeed, anyone who fasts for one day for Allah's Pleasure, Allah will keep his face away from the (Hell) fire for (a distance covered by a journey of) seventy years.”*

“The sleep of a fasting person is regarded as an act of worship, his remaining silent is regarded as glorifying God, the reward for his good deeds is multiplied, his supplications are accepted, and his sins are forgiven.”

Fasting makes the individual more aware of the many bounties of God. The hunger and thirst remind the fasting person of the poor who may rarely eat well. Fasting re-enforces the concept that wasting the Creator’s bounties is a sign of ingratitude to Him.

Muslims are reminded to be extra-generous during the month of Ramadan and to share the bounties that God has provided them, giving generously in charity. Our wealth is regarded as a trust from God, not really our own; will we be greedy with it and spend it only on ourselves, or will we strive to please Him by sharing it with others?

A person who carefully observes the month of Ramadan becomes closer to God. The self-restraint of Ramadan make the heart and mind accustomed to the remembrance and praise of God and to the obedience of His commandments. It is therefore a spiritual regime and a re-orientation process for the body and mind - the extent of the benefit depends on the performance and sincerity of the individual Muslim.

RAMADAN IS THE MONTH OF THE QUR'AN

God began revealing the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) during Ramadan in the year 610 C.E. The Holy Qur’an is known undoubtedly as “the most-read book in the world” for it is a book that is so often read, re-read and memorized, and all in its original language, Arabic. In Ramadan, Muslims are encouraged to focus as much time as possible on reading, listening to and understanding the teachings of the Glorious Qur’an. One of the ways Muslims get closer to the Qur’an during Ramadan is through a long congregational prayer known as Taraweeh that is offered in the late evening after the breaking of the fast. During this prayer it is customary that the entire Qur’an is recited over the course of the entire month, by a person called a Hafiz (Arabic, meaning protector).

A Hafiz is someone who has memorized the entire Qur’an, word for word, cover to cover. Since it was first revealed over 1400 years ago it is through the many Huffaz (plural of Hafiz) of the Qur’an that God has protected the authenticity of this Holy Book.

“O ye who believe! Fasting is prescribed to you as it was prescribed to those before you, that ye may (learn) self-restraint… Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur'an, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting…”(Al-Qur’an 2:183,185).

Laylat ul-Qadr, or the Night of Power, is a time for especially fervent and devoted prayer, and the rewards and blessings associated with worship on this night are manifold. This night is known to occur during one of the last few nights of Ramadan, thus the incentive to increase the nightly prayers during this time.

EID-UL FITR

The end of Ramadan is marked by the sighting of the new moon, which is followed by a day of celebration known as Eid-ul-Fitr or the ‘festival of fast-breaking’. Families wake up early in the morning, put on their best clothes and go to the mosque for the Eid sermon and congregational prayers. They thank the Merciful God for having given them the opportunity to experience the blessed month of Ramadan. The day is accompanied by celebration, socializing, festive meals and modest gift-giving especially to children. But before the festivities begin, every person, adult and child, must have already contributed towards Zakat-ul-Fitra. This is the giving of a meal, or cash equivalent, to a needy person to make sure that none are excluded from this happy occasion.

The Eid celebration is not merely about feasting and socializing. There is a deep significance for those who truly observed the holy month with their fasting, abstaining from all bad habits and striving hard to earn the pleasure of God. For the observant, the Merciful Allah has granted Eid as a day for forgiveness of sins. The Muslim is left with a feeling of happiness and joy and a renewed energy to face the rest of the year with faith and determination. Islam teaches that the objective of life is to earn the pleasure of God. The spiritual closeness that can be achieved during the month of Ramadan serves this purpose for those who truly work hard to benefit from it.

[1]Pbuh stands for “Peace be upon him”, an invocation of respect